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Grace Bible Church, NY
April 24, 2016

Remaining Faithful to the Purpose: 25th Anniversary Sermon
Selected Scriptures

A Brief History

Diane and I and Jonathan left California on April 17, 1991 with hopes, dreams and some trepidation about what we were undertaking. We were leaving both of our families and had a 3200 mile drive ahead of us, and Diane and I were still unnerved by Jonathan's ketoic hypoglycemia which had put him into a coma only a couple of weeks before on the very day we were packing the moving truck. The truck left with all our belongings and we spent three days at the hospital. The doctors finally given us clearance to travel, but we were supposed to stay in larger cities with good hospitals in case he had another episode. Instead, we had a blowout while driving through the New Mexico desert resulting in an unknown engine problem which prevented the car from starting. We hitchhiked to a Stucky's 10 miles away to get a tow truck which then took us to the little train town of Deming, New Mexico where we would have to spend the night until the car could be fixed in the morning. It was not the way I would have chosen to spend my 33rd birthday, and these events did cause us to wonder if God was trying to communicate some kind of warning or was Satan just trying to hinder us? How could we know then what we would experience over the next twenty-five years?

Paul states in 1 Corinthians 4:1-2, *"Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.*

² *In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.*" Desiring to be good stewards we pressed on. It was a beautiful drive having left California in the full bloom of Spring and then having wild flowers throughout the deserts and plains of the West. We spent a few days with relatives in Mississippi to rest, and we were also getting a better handle on how to recognize low blood sugars in Jonathan and correct them, so we were a little more at ease. We watched Spring go backwards as we drove north on Interstate 81 with the dogwoods being in full bloom in Mississippi and only in bud here, so we got to watch Spring arrive all over again.

We arrived in Wappinger, New York on the last Saturday in April, 1991 to begin our ministry in here. The next morning, Rev. John Koppelaar preached his final sermon as the Interim Pastor, and I preached my first sermon as Pastor that evening. So today, marks the completion of 25 years of ministry here at this church.

We quickly began to set up all our stuff which had been sitting in the Parsonage, find our way around on the confusing roads here, figure out where to shop, and find doctors that could help us with Jonathan and an OB-GYN for Diane who was three months pregnant with David. The Lord blessed us in all those areas, though we recognized quickly this was a radically different culture since the grocery stores had an aisle full of Italian foods including pastas we had never heard of, and almost no Mexican foods. Who had ever heard of canned tortillas? But no matter, we could handle that challenge by having anyone that came out from California bring sacks of tortillas in their luggage and we would freeze them.

The cultural differences were something we were concerned about because we knew those could cause unnecessary conflict if we were not aware, sensitive and careful. We wanted to come with the same frame of mind as Paul expressed in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. We came to proclaim Christ and teach the Scriptures, not to bring California culture. We would strive to do our best to adapt to the local culture as much as possible in any area that was not in violation of the Scriptures. We were aided in this by the fact that many of the people here were from other areas so there was already a greater tolerance for outsiders. We were also aided in that everyone spoke English, though it sounded strange to our ears, it was various forms of English.

The climate here is very different from Southern California, so we had some adjusting to do there too. Diane and I both enjoy thunderstorms, so that Spring and Summer were wonderful. Diane's favorite time of year is Autumn, and that Fall was an unusually gorgeous display of color, and we were able to enjoy several local drives leaf peeping before she gave birth to David at the end of October. The coming of Winter brought the wonder of seeing snow fall from the sky. We learned quickly that a snow storm was not a reason to panic and rush to the store to get milk and bread; we only needed to learn how to handle a car skidding on ice, and having learned that, we were ready for our second year in New York.

In the 25 years I have been here I have had the privilege of being able to do a lot of preaching and teaching here over the years, and I would not have wanted it any other way. According to my records, this is the 1,080th time I have preached on a Sunday morning from this pulpit. Add in the Sunday Night preaching that was done on weekly basis until the early 2000's, and the many special services for holidays and special occasions, and I have easily proclaimed the Scriptures from this pulpit over 1,800 times. Then there are all the Sunday School classes, weeknight Bible studies, and classes and seminars taught on Parenting, Leadership, Bible Survey, Hermeneutics, Theology and counseling. Then there are the many occasions I have represented this church when teaching or preaching at other locations.

We have seen a lot of people come and go over the years. I kept track of that for four years and then gave up for in that period of the yearly layoffs at IBM we added 178 people to our directory and removed 125. Average monthly attendance when I came was 70 and we have seen that fluctuate up and down since then to as high as 175 and as low as 76. The average this past quarter was 150.

There are only a few people here from when we first came in 1991. Mary Gellatly, Sandy Garcia, John & Nancy Halpin, Randy & Karen and Jimmy Ryan. We also have a few that have been here since the last Millennium - The Colón's, The DeTullio's, Regina & April, Philip Jordan, Andrea Jordan, The Mari's, The Strouds, the Welch's, and Jim Vitale. What I wrote in the forward of our 1997 pictorial directory is still true

What word describes the church? One word is "change" for the church is marked by change. Even this pictorial directory is only a snapshot of this church at a certain point in time. The congregation changes as old friends move away and new friends start coming. New babies are born and we all get older - which is not change we always like. Yet, change is good. It marks our redemption when we are changed into new creations (2 Cor. 5:17). As we walk with the Lord and become more mature we are "changed into [His] image" (2 Cor. 3:18). We also look forward to when we shall be changed from this corruptible body into a new glorious one at His coming (1 Cor. 15:58). Praise the Lord! Our Savior never changes (Heb. 13:8), but we do!

Changes

We have seen a lot of changes over the past 25 years. Some change has caused sorrow as friends have moved away, grief as some have died, and heartache as some of have chosen sin over righteousness and have walked away. However, most of the change has been good. We have certainly seen a lot of ministries start, many of which have become regular aspects of our church. Here are a few along with some significant milestones: First Old Fashioned Ice Cream Social - June 1991. First Vacation Bible School - July 1991. First parenting class - Sept. 1991. First Christmas Eve Service and Open House - Dec. 1991. First Good Friday Service - April 1992. First Sunday School / Annual Picnic - July 1992. Constitution amended to Elders & Deacons and leadership training classes began - 1993. Women's Servant Council formed - 1994. First "men's group" - 1995. Church sign erected - 1996. Chris Pandolfi ordained - Sept. 1997. Began Church Website - April 1998. Revised Constitution - Nov. 1998. Ministry at Hudson Haven / Elant - 1999. Church name changed to *Grace Bible Church* - 1999. First participation in Wappinger Town Day - Sept. 1999. AWANA started - Sept. 1999. Pastor Harris served on IFCA

International Executive Committee - 2000-2003. Elias Carrero becomes Associate Pastor and is ordained - 2005. G.I.R.L. time begins - 2005. Pastor Harris teaches at Irpin Seminary, Ukraine - Jan. 2006. Sunrise Resurrection Service - 2006. Evangelism Committee begins to use *The Way of the Master* and outreach efforts rapidly escalate - 2007. First Young Men's Challenge - 2008. College / Career begins weekly ministry - 2011. Website tops 100,000 visits / year - 2011. Website tops 200,000 visits / year - 2012. Ray Marchetti funeral - over 1,400 tracts about him passed out - October 2012. Sermon Audio added - 2014. Jim Zieger becomes Associate Pastor - Oct. 2015

Joys & Sorrows

There have, of course, been many important and joyous events in our lives over these years. David and Jimmy were both born here. There are all the common milestones of raising children - learning to walk, talk, ride a bike, personal faith, baptism, driving a car, getting a job, and now Jonathan & David will both be married in the next few months. We have experienced many wonderful things even in just our backyard including a balloon landing in it. We have also enjoyed many aspects of living here. Each season has its own beauty - Spring flowers, Summer gardens, Autumn color and even Winter snow can be a lovely scene and a even better reminder that God makes our scarlet sins as white as snow through faith in Jesus Christ. But mostly our joy has been in simply serving our Lord among our church family. We have had many dear friends over the years, and some have been close friends for many, many years, but our greatest joy is in seeing people come to know Jesus and mature in their walk with Him.

But that fact also brings to light the greatest sorrows we have experienced. Like anyone, we have had people who said they were our friends that turned against us personally for whatever reasons and that hurts - sometimes very deeply. However, our greatest grief has come from those who have professed faith in Christ, but then selfishly turn to pursue their own desires and disrupt the harmony of the church and give our enemies cause to ridicule Christianity, or worse, to walk away from the faith and bring shame on the name of the Lord Jesus. My heart is made heavy when I look over so many of the pictures from the last 25 years and see those that have departed from us out of their own selfishness and pride and those that have become apostate. Though I am not surprised that this happens because Scripture gives ample warnings about it and I saw it in the churches I grew up in, I am often surprised by whom it is and how petty the issues are that they use as their excuses.

Why then move so far from family, friends and the land you grew up in if you know in advance that pain and suffering will be part of it? For the same reasons that Paul expresses in 2 Corinthians 4. He begins, *"¹ Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, ²but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."* We concur with Paul and agree with his conclusions at the end of the chapter. We do not lose heart because we look beyond the temporal to what is eternal, so we consider the afflictions of the present to be light and not to be compared to the glory to come. There was a calling that God gave us many years ago, and there is a similar calling to every Christian.

Calling

Every Christian is called by God to personal faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. By His great mercy, that happened to me when I was very young. I grew up in a home in which Christ was loved and proclaimed. By the time I was six, I understood clearly that Jesus is the Son of God, a sinless man, and the Savior who died to pay the price of man's sin, then rose again to life on the third day, then ascended to heaven where He is preparing a place for those who follow Him. At that time the reality of personal sin also became evident. Though I do not know what the pastor preached on that

morning, I do remember him saying that all of us had sinned before we got to church. I figured he must have talked to my mother and she had let him know how the fighting between my brother and I made her life miserable on Sunday mornings. I was disobedient to my parents. Jesus did not die for just generic sinners, He had died for me, the sinner. Though I was active in church, it was not until I was in my late teens that my faith began to grow strong. It began with a simple quest to make my faith my own instead of something acquired by my upbringing. I wanted to know the reasons for what I had been taught and whether it was true. Finally reading through the entire Bible when I was 21 helped a lot, but working through my questions on science, evolution and the Bible after that became even more significant. Though I still have the highest regard for true science, I found that scientists are normal humans who often manipulate the facts or interpret them to fit their philosophical presuppositions instead of the actual evidence. My confidence in the Scriptures as the ultimate source of truth has never been shaken since. Since God is God, then He is certainly capable of doing things they way He said He did them, and since He does not lie as does man, then He has done it that way.

I went to seminary simply to gain the tools to study the Scriptures for myself and gain conviction based on what is true according to the Bible and not simply on someone's opinion. It is out of study done during that time that I became convinced that God has equipped and called every believer to serve Him (Romans 12; Ephesians 4). Matthew 6:33 makes it clear that every Christian is to seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness. These two Biblical principles mean that everyone who professes faith in Jesus Christ is to pursue God to the best of their ability according to the gifts He has given them in whatever ministry according to His providence. In my case, this ended up teaching the Scriptures as a Pastor.

Diane was raised in a nominal Christian home, but rejected the hypocrisy of what she saw in her home church. She wanted to know God, but was not sure if He was even there. She heard the gospel in her early twenties and turned to seek the Lord. God blessed her with a mentor who disciplined her personally in the Christian faith even while she was also getting involved in church and ministry. Diane in turn began to personally disciple those who were less mature in faith than she. Diane has been doing that ever since.

After we met and began to date, or rather, I began to court her, one of the things that drew us together was our mutual and serious desire to know and serve the Lord. Or as her family described it at the time, they did not think she would ever meet someone who was as fanatical about Christianity as her. Though I did not have plans to be a pastor when we met and married, we did both desire to serve the Lord anywhere and in any capacity as He desired and enabled us. It was totally by God's providence that I became a pastor and came here.

Commitment

There are several scriptural passages that constrain me in life and are the reason that I strive to remain faithful to the calling by which I have been called by God. I believe these truths are important not only to me but to anyone that is serious about following the Lord and serving Him in any capacity. We live in a time when it seems that not only has it become common to hear of pastors that have fallen into sin and lose their ministry, but in some ways worse, to hear of pastors that have turned aside from "*the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*" (Jude 3) to embrace aberrations and even blatant heresy. Many start well and end poorly. And what is true among pastors is even worse among the rest of the church. I can point to many that were at one time joyful in their fellowship with us and held to sound doctrine that have left to pursue every wind of doctrine, fables and fads, and what tickles their ears. There are many that have not heeded the warnings I have given and who have shipwrecked their lives, and tragically, not only theirs, but also the lives of those around them. Take heart to embrace these great Biblical truths and finish well.

Conversion: The first great truth is the radical change that is brought about by faith in Jesus Christ. The correct term for it is conversion (Acts 15:3). 2 Corinthians 5:17 states *“therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature, the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.”* What I once was I am no longer. As Paul states in Galatians 2:20, *“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”* I had been dead in my transgressions, but I was made alive together with Christ, for by God’s grace I have been saved (Eph. 2:5).

This conversion also brings about a radical change in the purpose of my existence. Whereas before I was a slave to sin, Satan and selfishness, I am now a slave to righteousness (Romans 6). I am not my own for I have been bought with the precious blood of Jesus as the price of my redemption (1 Peter 1:18-19; Romans 6:20). According to Ephesians 1:4 God chose me in Christ before the foundation of the world that I would be holy and blameless before Him. Romans 8:29-30 reveals what is sometimes referred to as the golden stairs of salvation and its purpose. God foreknew me and predestined me to become conformed to the image of His son so that Jesus would be the firstborn among many brethren, and He has carried out that plan in time in calling me and justifying me by His grace through faith in the Lord Jesus, and He has sealed the promise that He will also glorify me with an immortal and incorruptible body that will be like that of Jesus.

I usually sign my letters with a reference to this promise in Romans 8:29, because it is the reality of my purpose of existence, and it is not a pipe dream or a futile quest though I fully recognize the deficiencies of my present life. Though I still sin, I am forgiven in Christ because He who knew no sin was made to be sin on my behalf so that I might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). Though I know that there is work for me to do in following Christ for I must consider the members of my earthly body as dead to sin and lay aside sinful practices having put on the new self (Colossians 3), and I know that I will not achieve sinlessness in this life so that I am fully reflective of the image of Christ, yet I have hope for He has given my precious promises. I must be diligent to walk with the Lord, but I also know that He is the one that at work in me (Philippians 2:12-13) and that He will be faithful to His promise to perfect the good work He began in me (Philippians 1:6) and that one day I shall be like Him for I shall see Him just as He is (1 John 3:2).

That is the radical nature of conversion, and those promises belong to every true Christian. They should be making a difference in your life, and they will if you will embrace the radical conversion that comes with believing and holding fast to them. Everything begins to have proper perspective when you remember that the purpose of your existence and salvation is to become like Jesus.

Purpose - Matthew 28:18-20. Conversion changes my purpose in life to be about the Lord Jesus Christ instead of me. The inward quest of this purpose then is to seek His glory and His kingdom instead of my own. The outward quest of this purpose is to see other people be converted and become followers of Christ. That is what is meant in the Great Commission.

Jesus said in Matthew 28:18-20, *“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.”*¹⁹ *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,”*²⁰ *teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”* The purpose statement of Grace Bible Church arises directly from this passage - *Glorifying God by Making Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ*. There is one command, *make disciples of all nations*, carried out with three activities: Going, Baptizing and Teaching

God is glorified when we go out into the world and proclaim the gospel regardless of the response to the message for His righteousness is declared. He is glorified in one way by those who reject and are vessels of wrath, and He is glorified in another way by those who repent and become vessels of mercy. This is evangelism.

God is glorified when those who do repent personally identify themselves with Jesus' death, burial and resurrection by means of water baptism. Baptism does not save you, but it is a ritual every believer is to do as a public profession of their faith in Christ.

God is glorified when professing believers are taught the commandments of the Lord and how to walk according to them. This is edification, the building up of others in the Christian life, and it encompasses both knowledge and wisdom to apply it. True Christian fellowship will do this on a personal level as spiritual gifts are used and the one another commands are carried out.

Methodology - Ephesians 4:11-16 explains the methodology for fulfilling the directives of the Great Commission by the Church. ¹¹ *“And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, ¹² for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. ¹⁴ As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; ¹⁵ but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”*

The meaning of this passage is straight forward and relatively simple, but not necessarily easily carried out. The Scriptures have come to us through the apostles and prophets. The evangelists and the pastor-teachers are given by God to train the church to carry out the commands in the Scriptures. Evangelists train the flock to go out and proclaim the gospel. Shepherd - teachers equip the flock to carry out the ministry and build up them up to maturity. Notice that the goal here is that everyone in the body grows to become more like Christ resulting in being able to stand against heresy and deceitful doctrine and stand together in unity and love because every individual in it is doing their part according to how God has gifted and called them.

Those have been my goals over the last twenty five years and I have never wavered in them even during those time I have been most discouraged by the selfishness and foolishness of those who have been proud and arrogant like Diotrephes (3 John 9) or indifferent like Phygelus and Hermogenes (2 Timothy 1:15) or turned back to the world like Demas (2 Timothy 4:10). I praise the Lord there have been those who have been like Onesiphorus or Ephaphroditus and have brought refreshment during times of trouble (2 Timothy 1:16; Philippians 4:18), and many more who have been like Timothy, Titus, Prisca, Aquila, Urbanus, Tryphaena, Tryphosa and so many more were to Paul in co-laboring in the cause of Christ. Those will continue to be my goals for however long the Lord grants me breath for I am simply a slave of the Lord Jesus Christ, and a steward is to be found faithful.

My challenge to you is to make the same commitment to pursue becoming like Jesus and use the gifts God has entrusted to you to the best of your ability wherever He may put you regardless of what anyone else may do. As Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 15, God promises are true and unshakable, so *be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, know that you labor is not in vain in the Lord.*

Sermon Notes: 25th Anniversary Sermon - Remaining Faithful
Selected Scriptures

A Brief History

Milestones

Joys & Sorrows

Our greatest joy is in seeing people come to know Jesus and _____ in their walk with Him

Our greatest grief has come from those who have professed faith in Christ but _____

2 Corinthians 4 - We must look _____ the temporal to the eternal

Calling

Every Christian is called by God to personal _____ in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ

God has equipped and called _____ believer to serve Him (Romans 12; Ephesians 4)

Matthew 6:33 makes it clear that _____ Christian is to seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness

Every Christian should desire to _____ the Lord anywhere and in any capacity as He desires and enables

Commitment

You must be constrained by _____ truth to remain faithful to God's calling upon you

Too many start well, but _____ because they did not keep their commitment to God

Conversion

Conversion is the radical change of the individual from spiritual death to _____ by faith in Jesus Christ

Conversion changes the purpose of existence from _____ to sin, Satan and self to Christ and righteousness

God's promises are true and _____ - and God works in every Christian and will make them like Christ

Believing you exist and are saved to become like Jesus brings everything into proper _____

Purpose - Matthew 28:18-20

The inward quest to become like Christ results in the _____ quest to help others become like Him

God is glorified when the _____ is proclaimed because it declares His righteousness

God is glorified when an individual professes their faith and identifies with Christ in water _____

God is glorified when professing Christians learn His _____ and walk in them

Methodology - Ephesians 4:11-16

The _____ have come through the apostles and prophets

Evangelists and pastor - teachers _____ the church to carry out the commands of the Scriptures

The goal is that everyone in the body _____ and becomes more like Christ - resulting in spiritual maturity

Do not _____ though you will have others that will discourage you

Rejoice for those God _____ to encourage, refresh and be co-laborers in God's work

Be _____ to become like Jesus & serve Him however He has gifted you wherever He puts you

1 Corinthians 15:58 - be _____ and immovable for your labor is not in vain in the Lord

KIDS KORNER

Parents, you are responsible to apply God's Word to your children's lives. Here is some help.

Young Children - draw a picture about something you hear during the sermon. Explain your picture(s) to your parents at lunch. **Older Children** - Do one or more of the following: 1) Write down all the verses mentioned in the sermon and look them up later. 2) Count how many references are made to Christ. Talk with your parents about your own commitment to Christ and how to overcome discouragement.

THINK ABOUT IT!

Questions to consider in discussing the sermon with others. What is your own conversion story? When did you become a Christian? How have you seen your life change since then? How has God used you in the life of other people? Do you know what your spiritual gifts are? When did you start coming to Grace Bible Church? What significant events have you participated in? What joys have you had in your own life? What would you say are your greatest joys? What sorrows have you had in your own life? What would you say are your greatest griefs? How confident are you in the truth of the Scriptures? Are there any questions that need to be answered in order to be more confident? What is your plan to get answers to those questions? Which is more important to you - the kingdom and righteousness of God or your own kingdom and self-satisfaction? Do your actions match your claims? Do you personally know of examples of people who professed faith in Christ but have since turned to walk in their own wisdom and away from Christ? Describe the radical nature of conversion in becoming a Christian. Do you see yourselves as a slave of Christ, of something else, or autonomous and free? Have you been purchased by the precious blood of Jesus which secures redemption for those who believe? What is your purpose in life? Explain, and why is that your purpose? How does making disciples of Jesus Christ fit in with your purpose of life? If you are part of the body of Christ, do you know where you fit in? How important is your position within the body? Explain. What is the responsibility of the evangelist and pastor-teacher toward you and you toward them? Can you think of anything that would stop you from following and serving Christ? How can you prepare yourself to overcome such an obstacle?